



She Kept  
the Bar  
Between  
Them

Stories  
from Thailand

by Steve Rosse

# **SHE KEPT THE BAR BETWEEN THEM - STORIES OF THAILAND**

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## RAIN

Pa Laeng woke up with a start as the young man came running into the shop. Although he napped through most of the day, sprawled in a tattered deck chair that seemed always about to collapse under his gaunt frame, Pa Laeng never failed to wake up when somebody crossed the threshold of his little store. The young man stopped just under the awning that covered the cement porch at the front of the shop, his knit cap and the shoulders of his torn T-shirt wet and glistening in the sunlight which was still shining through the rain. He stood uncertainly, peering into the dimness of the shop, a plastic bag containing a fresh fish and some vegetables in one hand.

The shop was half-way between the Jong Thong Thani housing development and the big intersection with Chao Fah Road, so Pa Laeng was used to the construction workers from the development stopping into his place when they were caught by rain on their way back from the weekly fresh market. “If you want to wait out the rain, you have to buy something,” said Pa Laeng from his chair.

The young man brushed at the damp patches on his shirt and glanced back outside. The rain was picking up and he made an obvious decision. “I’ll take a Lipo,” he said as he sat down on one of the concrete benches on the porch, as if coming any farther into the shop would commit him to a bigger purchase.

Pa Laeng had been easing himself up from his chair, but when he heard the young man speak he sank back down and said, “The cooler’s over there, pay me first.”

The young man’s face remained impassive, but he looked at Pa Laeng with hard eyes as he rose and dug some coins from the pocket of his tattered Levi’s. He crossed the porch and placed the coins on the battered old child’s school desk which served as Pa Laeng’s checkout counter. He took a bottle from behind the cracked glass of the cooler and sat back down. This time he sat with his back to Pa Laeng.

The rain increased quickly. The sunlight diminished until it was almost as dark as night and water jetted off of the corners of the patched canvas awning. The old man pulled a faded sarong from the back of his chair and wrapped it around his skinny shoulders. Minutes went by and the rain continued to crash down around the store. The young man pulled his knees up and sank his chin onto his chest; there was a stiff breeze crossing the porch but Pa Laeng had not invited him inside the shop.

The rain began to slacken after about 10 minutes. Finally it was a drizzle, the sun came back out and steam began to rise from the mud around the shop. The young man had left an inch of liquid in the bottom of his bottle, as if he was sure Pa Laeng would chase him away as soon as he finished his drink, but now he gulped it and picked up his plastic bag. He rose and began to leave.

“How many of you are there now, up at the Thani?” asked Pa Laeng from his seat. “What?” said the young man, stopping at the edge of the porch. “How many of you are working up there now? I hear they’re way behind schedule, and the bank’s not releasing any more money.” A dry chuckle rose from Pa Laeng’s bony chest. “I imagine that any day now they’ll call Immigration and have you all trucked off. That’s what they do, you know, rather than pay you the last time. They just send you all back across the border.”

The young man was looking at Pa Laeng with undisguised anger. “What’s it to you, old man?” he said. Pa Laeng was draping his sarong over the back of his chair, and he froze. He glared at the young man from under bushy eyebrows that drooped down almost to his cheekbones. “Hey, boy, you be careful what you say, or I’ll call Immigration myself.”

A glimmer of reflected light behind Pa Laeng caught the young man’s eye, and he looked past the old man to the back wall of the store, to a big shrine with effigies of the Nine Emperor Gods. A framed picture next to the shrine showed Pa Laeng, as a much younger man, dressed in a white smock spattered with blood, walking in a procession with steel rods inserted through his cheeks.

The young man smiled for the first time. He advanced and stood over Pa Laeng's chair. "Do that, you old bastard," he said. "and see what it gets you. They are behind, and they have to finish the project in two months or lose all their money. If Immigration takes me, they have to take us all, and the boss isn't going to like losing all his workers. He'll want to know who made the phone call."

The young man reached out to where a rusty bottle and can opener hung from a bit of plastic string next to the cooler, and with a jerk he pulled it down. He ran the sharp point of it over his thumb and said, "Did it hurt, old *jek*, when you stuck those pins in your face?"

Pa Laeng had sunk down in his chair and his voice shook as he said "Get out! Get out of my shop!" The young man said, "I'm going." Suddenly he reached down and scraped the can opener along the top of the old school desk. It made a horrible ripping sound and Pa Laeng covered his face with his hands.

"You shouldn't talk so much, old man. Wasn't so long ago, you were right where I am now. I know about you *jek*. We have *jek* where I come from too."

The young man took his bags and walked off down Thanon Khwang, through the clouds of oily steam rising from the wet pavement, toward the huge half finished gates of Jong Thong Thani. Even though it was still early, Pa Laeng closed the iron grill in front of his shop, and the neighbors could hear his prayers late into the night, over the sound of the rain.

## PILGRIMAGE

The lights of Bangkok's skyline slid up the taxi's windscreen like a meteor shower in reverse. Murray's eyes felt cleansed by the sight of it. The sound of the tires on the freeway had a quality he'd never heard before, a drone that possibly had never existed before he noticed it. The smile of the desk clerk when he checked in was compassion made flesh, and he could have spent the rest of the night staring into that bright brown face. The amenities in his room were unrealistically solid and present; the chunky bottle of shampoo seemed heavier than it should be for its size, like an ingot of gold. There was a hypnotic thumping coming through the wall that Murray thought at first was people making love in the next room, but came to realize was in fact a pile driver on some distant construction site. Still wearing the clothes he had travelled in he crawled into bed and was amazed by the loudness of his own breathing. He couldn't seem to catch his breath. They had warned him not to fly.

He was awakened by the brutal tropical sunlight coming in the windows. The water came out of the shower nozzle delightfully hot; the towel was as soft as fleece. In the coffee shop he ordered the free breakfast that came with his room and he ate every morsel of food. It had been two decades since the last time he'd tasted eggs or bacon. The combination of textures, silky and crisp, was a delight. The eggs were rich and the bacon biting on his tongue. The coffee was instant, bitter and acidic; he loaded it with sugar and milk but still it was strong enough to make his heart jump. He drank four cups. He snowed a blizzard of salt on the eggs, slathered butter and jam on the toast, and doused the sliced mango until it was swimming in lime juice. He smacked his lips and chewed with his mouth open. He held every forkful under his nose and took a deep sniff before he ate it. He drew stares from the other diners but he didn't care. He walked slowly out of the coffee shop with one hand on the wall to steady himself but with a toothpick poking jauntily

from the corner of his mouth. Even the toothpick tasted good.

All the streets around his hotel were lined with bars, big and small, and all of them were closed at this hour. Down every gutter paced a street sweeper in an orange vest pushing a pile of garbage with a broad sturdy broom; every sidewalk was lined with vendors' tables. To his eyes the piles of garbage were as colorful and alluring as the piles of merchandise on the tables. The vendors sang out to pedestrians with voices that sounded like children at play. Every wall was plastered with garish advertising, giant photographs of young women holding all sorts of products close to their faces, new cars like shiny beetles, plastic kitchenware in kindergarten hues. Even the black asphalt had sheen of oil on it that kicked back rainbows.

Above the doorways were the signs. Murray stood in the street, staring up at the signs, and let traffic go around him. The signs were all brightly painted and each had on it some kind of cartoon representation of a woman. The cartoon women were clownishly proportioned and for the most part naked. Not nude but emphatically naked, bulbous fertility totems with black hair and Asian eyes but skin as pink as flamingos. The names of the bars were the ribald playground snickers of ten-year-old boys: Pussy Galore, Hanky Spanky, Hot Licks.

Murray found a bar that was open. It was called "Sea Hag," and the naked woman on this sign was old and ugly, rising from the sea on a broom under a pointy black hat. Murray was pleased because he recognized the joke. In Thai rhyming slang, when pronounced in the correct tones, "*si hak*" meant "loose cunt." It was the only sign on the street with an adult sense of humor, and it hung over the only open door on the block. Murray threw his head back and laughed out loud. His laughter surprised him; he could not remember the last time he'd laughed out loud.

An industrial fan on a five-foot-tall pole was standing just inside the door, moving stale air out to the sidewalk. Murray enjoyed the feeling of pushing directly into the blast of humid, stinking air

before sidling around the fan. Just such a fan, and a wet bathroom floor, killed Thomas Merton in his Bangkok monastery, thought Murray. He had read a lot of Merton at one point in his life, and took it all so seriously, but now the mundane mechanism of the visionary mystic's death made him laugh again. The laughing made him gasp for breath. He staggered a bit getting to a stool at the end of the bar. He wondered if the bartender would try to shoo him away. The place was obviously not open for business. There was no music playing and the only light in the room came from some ugly white fluorescents hung overhead. Bus trays full of glassware were collected at the far end of the bar, ready to go into the back room to be washed. The stubby faceted highball glasses, upended in their red plastic tubs, reminded Murray of rows of diamonds on red velvet trays. He thought the glasses were beautiful.

Murray climbed up onto the stool. His short walk from the hotel had left him drenched in sweat and exhausted. They had warned him against over-exertion. He settled himself as he had been taught many years ago: stacking vertebra upon vertebra like bricks in a wall. Stable. Solid. Centered. His hands were flat on the bar. He felt the familiar nervous urge to bounce his right leg but fought it. He remained still and under his breath he began his mantra. *Samaa arahant... samaa arahant... samaa arahant.* A feeling of peace grew in him, something he had not felt in twenty years. He had never been able to meditate successfully in the States. He had too much attachment there, to job, to family, to opinions. But he was retired now, the kids were grown, he had given away all he had. In a Bangkok bar he was attached to nothing; it was easier to let go, to become nothing. He slowly closed his eyes and concentrated on his breathing. He imagined a clear glass sphere, about the size of a grape, floating in the air immediately in front of the spot between his eyebrows. He allowed the imaginary sphere to descend slowly and enter his right nostril. He followed the sphere with his attention, breath by breath, as it crept down the center of his body toward a position half-way between his navel and his coccyx, where it

came to rest.

He focused on the sphere, made it solid in the core of his being, made it the anchor, the keystone of the universe, the motionless molecule at the center of the hub of the wheel. The wooden bar under his fingers felt massive as a boulder. The vinyl bar stool creaked like a cricket. The air was thick and fetid like the atmosphere over a swamp; he smelled cigarettes and beer and vomit and urine and cooking oil. He smelled perfume and semen and diesel fuel and rotting flowers. He breathed in through his mouth in an effort to taste it all. He heard dogs barking in the street in front of the bar and he could count their numbers by their individual voices. He heard lust in a rooster crowing in the alley behind the bar, he heard hunger in a mosquito whining over his head. It was only when it ceased that he noticed the *pok... pok... pok* of a wooden mortar and pestle. The sound was coming through the door at the back of the bar. There were plastic beads hung in that door; he heard somebody push through them and pause. Whoever it was disturbed few of the beads in passing and made little sound; it was a woman.

With his eyes still closed he waited while she considered whether to serve him or throw him out. She approached him, and by the slowness of her approach he knew she had not made up her mind. He opened his eyes just as she arrived opposite him; she kept the bar between them. He saw from her clothes and bearing that she was not a cleaning woman and not a prostitute; he assumed that she was a partner in the ownership of the bar. Her black hair shone like onyx, her skin was the color of honey. The gold at her throat and wrists glinted under the austere fluorescent light. He didn't try to guess her age, it didn't matter to him. She was slim and shapely and very self-assured; Murray found her instantly attractive. She was giving him a grin, the kind of grin a woman gives an impudent child.

"Hey. You. What you want?" she asked in English. He heard challenge in her voice, but it was without aggression. There was curiosity too, and invitation. He replied automatically in Thai.

“Beer Singh, Little Sister.”

She raised an eyebrow but showed no more surprise than that. Plenty of foreigners in Bangkok can order a beer in Thai. The woman pulled a wet bottle from the slush in a cooler. The label had soaked off during the night but they both recognized the brand by the shape of the bottle. She put it in a foam sleeve and placed it onto the bar, her movements so gentle there was no sound when the bottle contacted the wood. A sign of respect, which Murray rewarded with a smile.

She casually tested his fluency. “Has Grandfather eaten yet? I can send the boy for food from the street, with respect.”

“Eaten already, thank you with affection. I beg for an ash tray a little bit.”

The woman went to the bus tubs at the end of the bar and dug out a round glass ash tray. He took a brand new pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and tore open the top. He pulled the first cigarette from the pack and ran it through his fingers, marveling at its compact efficiency. He put it to his nose and smelled the cheap Thai tobacco. Memories came flooding back to him: voices, songs, faces, his bare feet in sand. He felt lightheaded and swayed a bit on his stool. He focused again on aligning his spine and regained his balance. There was a sharp pain beginning in his temples, which he ignored. Without thinking he tapped the butt end of the cigarette on his thumbnail and smiled at how the old movements came back intact after so long an absence. The woman wiped out the ash tray with a paper cocktail napkin before she placed it in front of him, again without making a sound. She smiled at him, and this time her smile was open and friendly and genuine.

“Grandfather likes papaya salad, with respect?”

“Grandfather used to like it very much, with affection,” he answered. At the moment he could not recall the taste of papaya salad, but he remembered what it looked like, and he remembered that it was best when served with tiny black crabs.

“I am making some,” said the woman. “When I am finished,